

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Sweeney and Coombs Building
OWNERS: Scott and Lisa Arnold
APPLICANTS: Same as Owner
LOCATION: 310 Main Street – Main Street Market Square
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III.d
HPO FILE NO: 08PL63
DATE ACCEPTED: Apr-14-08
HAHC HEARING: May-15-08
PC HEARING: May-22-08

SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 3A & 11A, Block 33, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story masonry commercial building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Sweeney and Coombs Building, located at 310 Main Street and built in 1880, was designed by Eugene T. Heiner, one of Houston's leading architects of the late nineteenth century. Other important Houston buildings designed by Heiner include the Houston Cotton Exchange Building, the W. L. Foley Dry Goods Building, and the Brashear Building, all located within in the Main Street Market Square Historic District.

The Sweeney and Coombs Building was the original home of the Sweeney and Coombs jewelry company, the predecessor of today's Sweeney & Co. Jewelers. Partners J. J. Sweeney and Edward L. Coombs were prominent businessmen and real estate owners in Houston in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The two men also built the Sweeney and Coombs Opera House on Fannin in 1891, and with additional partner Gus Fredericks, built the Sweeney, Coombs, and Fredericks Building at 301 Main Street in 1889.

The Sweeney and Coombs Building meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6, is a contributing structure to the Main Street Market Square National Register Historic District, and was built before 1905 - all considerations for Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 1880, architect Eugene Heiner was commissioned by the Sweeney and Coombs jewelry company to design a new building at what was then numbered as 50 Main Street in 1880. A disastrous fire in 1879 had destroyed half of the block of Main between Congress and Preston. Built after the neighboring Smith and Stuart Buildings at 306 and 308 Main, the Sweeney and Coombs Building continued the row of impressive three-story buildings on this block. Designed in the Victorian Italianate style, the Sweeney and Coombs Building was one of the most ornate buildings in Houston at the time. A clock was installed between the second and third floors for the convenience of the courthouse area since the massive row of new buildings on Main Street blocked the view of the City Hall clock in Market Square.

The building at 310 Main was the first building occupied by Sweeney and Coombs, a Houston jewelry business that continues today under the name Sweeney & Co. Jewelers. The company of Sweeney and Coombs grew out of a pawn brokerage owned by John Jasper "J. J." Sweeney. Born in Illinois in 1850, J. J. Sweeney came to Texas in the late 1860s or early 1870s and worked on the Columbia Tap Railroad. He soon married and moved to Houston to operate a loan office and later the jewelry store in partnership

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with Edward L. Coombs. Coombs, born in Kentucky in 1844, was a prominent Houston businessman of the late nineteenth century. He served as a director of the Planters and Merchants Bank and the American Brewing Company. He and Sweeney bought the Gray's Opera House in Houston in 1885, and in 1891, erected a five-story opera house on Fannin known as the Sweeney & Coombs Opera House, also designed by Eugene Heiner. Sweeney and Coombs were among the largest real estate owners in Houston at the time.

Gus Fredericks became a partner in 1889, and the firm, now known as Sweeney, Coombs & Fredericks, relocated in 1890 to the new Sweeney, Coombs and Fredericks Building at 301 Main Street on the corner of Main and Preston (1889; National Register, COH Landmark).

In 1881, Grunewald's music store moved into the Sweeney and Coombs Building, probably as the first occupant of the upper stories. The Grunewald family had been in the music business in New Orleans since 1852. Around 1870, Renzo Grunewald founded a Houston store. Clifford Grunewald took over in 1880 or 1881. Grunewald's was the first establishment in Houston to sell pianos, organs, and other musical instruments. Sheet music in French, German, and Italian was imported from Europe, and music teachers held classes in the upper rooms. An 1890 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows this building as a three-story structure with a shirt factory on the third floor. In 1896, the Sanborn Maps indicate Grunewald's occupied the entire building.

Clifford Grunewald was also a composer who composed the "Houston Heights Polka" for the piano in 1893. The polka was dedicated by Clifford Grunewald to his friend, Colonel N. L. Mills, Superintendent of Real Estate, Omaha and South Texas Land Company, which developed the huge planned community of Houston Heights (NR-MRA; COH Historic Districts). There was so much fervor associated with the development of Houston Heights that Grunewald not only composed his "lively" polka to honor Mills but it was also reminiscent of the very active real estate boom in the community at that time.

Grunewald's continued to occupy the building, with music teachers or other professionals occupying the upper floors, until 1905. At that time, J. J. Sweeney's loan office took possession of the ground floor space and Grunewald's moved to 1009 Texas Avenue. This would indicate that Sweeney still owned the building, even though it was referred to as the Grunewald Building during the music store's occupancy. The building was later owned by A. C. Bowers for a number of years.

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) had offices in the building in 1911. By 1920, Mistrot and Company, a ladies wear company, had moved into the building from 312 Main Street next door. It remained only a short while, but other clothiers continued to occupy the ground floor commercial space. Days Clothiers moved in during 1925 or 1926, and occupied the building until the late 1970s. The Musician's Protective Association Local #55 A. F. M. occupied the third floor for a time, and the Hill-O-Music House occupied the second floor for a number of years starting in the late 1920s.

The property had been vacant for fifteen years when the current owner bought the building in 1994 and began renovations. The building's original Victorian features were uncovered and reconstructed, and the building restored to its original appearance.

Eugene T. Heiner, the building's architect, was a prominent Houston architect who designed many of the most important buildings in Houston at the time. Heiner was born in New York City on August 20, 1852. He was apprenticed to an architect in Chicago at the age of thirteen and moved to Dallas in 1877 from Terre Haute, Indiana. In 1878 he moved to Houston, where he practiced for the rest of his life. He achieved special prominence as a designer of county courthouses and jails during the 1880s and 1890s. Although Heiner designed countless buildings in Texas, including almost 40 courthouses and jails, few of his buildings survive in Houston. Those works surviving include the Houston Cotton Exchange and

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Board of Trade Building (1884) at 202 Travis, the W. L. Foley Dry Goods Building (1889) at 214-218 Travis, and the Brashear Building (1882) at 910 Prairie, which is the most similar in design to the Sweeney and Coombs Building. Heiner also designed the Sweeney and Coombs Opera House (1890), and the Houston Ice and Brewing Company plant (1893), both demolished.

Heiner's buildings of the 1870s and 1880s often employed detail typical of American High Victorian architecture. In the late 1880s he occasionally employed the Richardsonian Romanesque style without abandoning certain strong High Victorian inclinations. Heiner was a founding member of the Texas State Association of Architects organized in 1886. He was married to Viola Isenhour in Dallas in 1878, and they had four daughters. Heiner died in Houston on April 26, 1901.

The Sweeney and Coombs Building is located within the Main Street Market Square National Register and City of Houston Historic Districts. The National Register district was established in 1983, and the City of Houston district was designated by City Council in 1998. The Main Street Market Square district is located on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou between Milam and San Jacinto Streets, and encompasses the area surrounding Market Square as well as the Main Street Business District between Buffalo Bayou and Texas Avenue. The buildings within the district range from modest, mid-nineteenth-century brick commercial buildings to a number of small but ornately detailed High Victorian commercial buildings, such as the Sweeney and Coombs Building, as well as a fine selection of multi-story public, bank, and office buildings.

At the time of the National Register Historic District nomination survey in 1983, the Sweeney and Coombs Building was listed as non-contributing due to the later addition of the concrete facade. However, now that the incompatible alterations have been reversed and the original facade restored, the Sweeney and Coombs Building is a contributing structure to both the Main Street Market Square National Register and City of Houston Historic Districts.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Sweeney and Coombs Building is a three-story, three-bay rectangular building of brick construction with an Italianate facade, featuring a striking, pedimented cornice, arched windows, and elaborate hood molds.

Days Clothiers, probably sometime in the 1950s or early 1960s, did a disastrous remodeling to the entire building, covering the ornate Victorian Italianate exterior plaster work with a featureless concrete slab on the second and third floors, and destroying the elaborate cornice and the original three-bay iron storefront on the ground floor. Severe structural damage to the building occurred when an elevator was added.

By 1994, the property had been vacant, badly deteriorated, and partially roofless for fifteen years, when the current owner bought the building and began renovations. Ten "thirty cubic yard" dumpsters of debris were removed from the property before reconstruction could begin. The 1950s "blank" facade was removed, and the original ornate stucco was resculptured. The storefront and cornice were rebuilt. The building was restored structurally and the second floor was renovated for offices with commercial lease space on the first floor.

The building was one of the first to receive a Certificate of Appropriateness under the new City of Houston Historic Preservation Ordinance, and has received attention in national and local publications for its preservation and restoration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fox, Stephen. *Houston Architectural Guide*. Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990.

Houston Architectural Survey, Vol VI, Pg 1246-1247, 1980.

Handbook of Texas Online, "Eugene Heiner" <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/HH/fhe48.html>.

National Register listing for the Sweeney, Coombs, & Fredericks Building. THC Atlas, <http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/shell-kword.htm>

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S NA **S - satisfies NA - not applicable**

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):

- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);

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- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8)).

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2));

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3));

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Sweeney and Coombs Building at 310 Main Street.

SWEENEY AND COOMBS BUILDING
310 MAIN STREET
CURRENT PHOTO



SWEENEY AND COOMBS BUILDING
310 MAIN STREET
SITE LOCATION MAP
NOT TO SCALE

